Duke University Library
MAR 9 1951
Durham, N. C.

Chap Book

Published by the

COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

In cooperation with Brandeis University

As a Supplement to THE CEA CRITIC

Vol. XIII, No. 2, February, 1951

Copyright, 1951, by The College English Association

The Quick and The Dead
"English" or "Literature"?

By

ALBERT GUERARD

Brandeis University

There are two opposite tendencies manifest in our profession today: contraction and expansion. The first would give preeminence, if not exclusive dominion, to purely American literature: of Americans, by Americans, for Americans; in the American idiom and the American grain; racy of the American soil and reeking with the American way of life; not merely ourselves first, last and all the time, but ourselves alone. According to this conception, the late lamented Harold Bell Wright should be of greater concern to us than aliens like Dante and Goethe. My sole comment is a blunt denial. It simply is not so.

This conception is a form of the nationalistic fallacy, the bane of the last two centuries: literature arises obscurely and inevitably from the folk, and cannot be separated from the folk and the land—*Blut und Boden*. The problem may be focussed in the two antagonistic conceptions of culture: the culture of the anthropologists, which is a mass of folkways and unconscious patterns, and the culture in the classical sense, defined for us by Goethe and Matthew Arnold: the pursuit of our total

---

This address was originally delivered at the Annual CEA Meeting, Holland House Taverne, New York City, December 27, 1950. The author is Professor of General and Comparative Literature.

perfection. I take it for granted that the English field is not a division of Anthroposociology. Our goal is not a blind acceptance of the folkways, but "turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits."

The second tendency is expansion. Beyond the limits of this vast Republic, we should take in, not merely English literature, but all literature in English, and all great literature wherever found. Our domain ignores political, racial, linguistic boundaries. It is not national, but human: *homo sum*. Art is that which enhances the consciousness of life; and in literature, we recognize only two divisions, not the ancient and the modern, not the home-grown and the foreign, but the quick and the dead. Job, Jonah, Ecclesiastes, Lucretius, are alive to me, as *The Manatee* is not.

This is the tendency which we are here to discuss to-night. It assumes many forms, with many inadequate and controversial names: comparative literature, general literature, great books, world masterpieces, and even, at Brandeis for instance, the Humanities. Our criterion may be impugned as too catholic: as a matter of fact, it implies a severe limitation of our field. We are not bound to study anything that ever appealed to some men, somewhere: *universal* literature, the masterpieces of all cultures, is a huge haphazard store house, not an integrated whole. Many parts are too unfamiliar to elicit any response from us. On the other hand, we cannot limit ourselves to those works which have been appreciated by all men, at all times and everywhere: for not even Shakespeare and the Bible would qualify. *World* literature expresses a distant goal, a pious hope, rather than a reality. My own suggestion is to call our field simply *literature,* without any adjective. Although there are innumerable branches in history, the subject is known as *history*. It was Harry Levin who suggested my key words: *English,* or *Literature?* It is evident that, in an English-speaking country, the terms are not mutually exclusive: the problem is entirely one of emphasis. And by literature, I mean the body of works which have actual significance for us; historically, those which have become part and parcel of our heritage. With the understanding that this heritage is not an exclusive tradition: it is capable of indefinite expansion, through the glad acceptance of new works, through the discovery and assimilation of masterpieces even from remote ages and far-off climes.

Now many of you have misgivings about this tendency. It seems to threaten cherished habits, and perhaps vested interests. Some of you may react to world literature in the same way as the D.A.R. to the flag of the United Nations; forgetting that our father Washington proudly called himself a citizen of the great Republic of humanity at large. It seems to me that these fears should easily be allayed. What I shall call, for the sake of convenience, world literature, is itself part of our tradition. Until barely a century ago, it was indeed the major part. Our ancestors studied "literature" in the light of precepts and examples that

came down from the Greeks. No one would have thought that the *Iliad* could be ignored, and the *Columbiad* of Joel Barlow studied in its place. Or that, for the profound discussion of tragedy by Aristotle, we could substitute the spirited dramatic criticism of George Jean Nathan. Historically, world literature is the orthodox tradition, the national study of literature a modern heresy.

As for our professional interests, they are not in the least menaced. We are all "comparatists" whether we admit it or not; and we all have studied the principles of general literature, the aims and methods of criticism, even if it were exclusively with English and American examples. Supposing that the name of our craft—or, in the vernacular, our racket—be changed from *English* to *Literature*, I see no reason why any one of us should suffer. Our colleagues in France are known, not as professors of French, but as professors of letters. Names matter surprisingly little. Our vocabulary is full of absurdities, like *Romanticism*. We manufacture batches of *bachelors*, including spinsters, who, within a few years, cease to be bachelors.

My plea for a view of literature wider than the national is not—God forfend!—idealistic. For idealism is the worst term of reproach in a land committed to the defense of the Eternal Verities. My argument is strictly realistic: I am urging you not to close your eyes to plain facts. For world literature is not a theory, but a condition. It begins, not in the graduate school, but in the nursery. I have not yet encountered an American child so committed to hundred-per-centism that, if exposed to Grimm's Fairy Tales, he would rebel: "This is an un-American activity!" Adolescents have read for ages, and still read if only in the form of comics, those great masters of juvenile fiction, Jules Verne and Alexandre Dumas. The common man, if he has but a few volumes on his shelves, owns the Bible, the canon of an Oriental literature. In his log cabin, Lincoln also had *The Arabian Nights*. Half a century ago, the barely literate enjoyed *The Wandering Jew* and the *Mysteries of Paris*; they still read *Les Misérables*. This process continues under our eyes. At any moment, a best seller, for the unsophisticated, may be by a foreign author and about a foreign theme. Only yesterday, it was *The Arch of Triumph*, by Erich Maria Remarque; or a story of a French Catholic girl under the Second Empire, told by an Austrian Jew: *The Song of Bernadette*. To-day we have *The Egyptian* and *The Adventurer* by Waltari. When we come to—shall we say loftier regions? the international, more accurately the supranational character of literature becomes increasingly more evident. When the French abandoned the worship of Greco-Roman antiquity, their masters were the oddly assorted quartet Shakespeare, Ossian, Scott and Byron. Half a century ago, we all swore by Ibsen, Nietzsche and Tolstoy. To-day, a critic will mention offhand Stendhal, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Pirandello, Gide or Thomas Mann. This is the very substance of literature. To claim that these writers are alien, because they are foreign, that they should be studied exclusively by

professional linguists within the framework of their own national culture, would be a deliberate ignoring of plain realities.

I may add that in our own *Fach,* the purely English field, we cannot afford to be isolationists. For the right appreciation of Chaucer, we should know that he is the heir of French and Italian traditions, and that he owes more to the fabliau writers and to the compatriots of Boccaccio than to Beowulf. Any serious study of Milton will trace his sources of inspiration in the Bible, in the epic and drama of Greece, in Vergil, in Dante, perhaps even in Du Bartas and Vondel: he is far more indebted to them than he is to Chaucer. We cannot understand Pope without Horace and Boileau; Byron without the *Sturm und Drang;* Katherine Mansfield without Maupassant and Chekov; Shaw without Ibsen—and more of Dumas Fils than he cared to admit; Dreiser without Zola; T. S. Eliot without a heady paradoxical blend of Laforgue and Brunetière.

Here extreme caution is necessary. At times such influences are frankly admitted: Pio Baroja claims that his masters were Balzac, Dickens and Dostoevsky—three mighty mountains to beget an amiable mouse. At times the influence is denied: Cabell rejects the idea that he is a disciple of Anatole France; and Pierre Benoit affirms that *L'Atlantide* owes nothing to Rider Haggard's *She.* At times, an apparent influence may be a coincidence: Baudelaire recognized Poe as his twin. The weakness of Comparative Literature in the narrower sense is that it seeks to establish actual filiation, when resemblances may result simply from similar causes. The decadent, Symbolist, aesthetic movements throughout Europe in the nineties were to a large extent spontaneous in each nation rather than imitative.

This leads us to a major proposition: in history—political, scientific, artistic, and literary as well—the *period,* far less definite of course than the nation-state, is a more profound reality. At one glance, you can tell that a picture belongs to the mid-eighteenth century rather than the mid-nineteenth: it takes close examination and expert knowledge to determine whether it is French, English or German. The history of literature is not absolutely autonomous. A book is not purely begotten by other books: it comes out of the author's personal experience, and out of the conditions and spirit of the time. There is plenty of life left in that old ghost, the *Zeitgeist.* And because I cannot admit that books form a continuous chain, I am doubtful about the wisdom of studying the whole evolution of mankind exclusively through great books. James Watt wrote no great book, yet the industrial revolution was one of the most decisive in human history. This is said by one who feels affectionate admiration for Stringfellow Barr, Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins.

My plea is simply to transfer from the field of general history to that of literature the essential conception of Arnold Toynbee. There are no national cultures. The proper unit is the fairly conscious and fairly

cohesive *civilization*. The Western world is one, even though torn by civil strife. World unity is ahead of us, something to strive for, through the converging evolution of several civilizations still imperfectly harmonized. I have serious misgivings about courses and anthologies that are all inclusive. For the full appreciation of literature, a tradition must be taken for granted, and traditions cannot be assimilated overnight.

Not that I would erect a Maginot line around our Western tradition. We must correct the vast provincialism of the West in two ways. The first is general, negative, and a little vague: we must make our students realize that our tradition—philosophical, literary, political, and religious as well—is not the sole, the universal tradition; that it has parallels in the East, with perhaps even deeper roots, and flowers which are no less fair. We must strive to make this, not the American century, but the century of man. The second is limited, definite, practical: we should welcome and promote the assimilation, which cannot be sudden and wholesale, of masterpieces from other climes. It was Galland who gave us *The Arabian Nights* and Fitzgerald *The Rubaiyat*: such conquests could be multiplied. But if we imagine that in one brief course we can make our own the spiritual treasures of the Arabic, Hindu and Chinese world, the truth is not in us.

So I define our field as the area of Western culture, with the proviso that this culture must be left constantly open to foreign masterpieces of the past and the present. As in world politics, so in world literature, I believe that regional understandings should proceed *pari passu* with world-wide organization. I neither minimize the obstacles to world unity, nor admit that they are insuperable. We must hasten the day when the major masterpieces of the various civilizations are appreciated by intelligent readers everywhere in the world; and when a book just written by an Arab, a Japanese, an Indonesian, a Hindu, a Chinese will find a ready audience in Europe and America.

To some this ideal, like perpetual peace, may be a dream, and not even a beautiful dream. In their opinion, it would obliterate that diversity which at present is our delight as well as our torment. It would sap that deep harmony between soil, language, people, literature which gives supreme works their unique savor. It would give us instead a grey uniformity: three billion minds with but a single thought. A nightmare aptly expressed by a French critic of Unesco, with its emphasis on human goals, with its condemnations of all distinctions based on color, race or sex: *"Oh! ces gens de l'Unesco! Sans couleur, sans race, sans sexe!"*

I realize the danger of *Gleichschaltung* on a global scale: it was bad in Nazi Germany, and is bad enough in these United States. But a truly humanistic culture would not lead to such a deadly uniformity, the rule of the Great Anarch prophesied at the end of the *Dunciad*. Within a united world, there will be ample room for local differences. Indeed,

it might be well to break up those unwieldy giants, English literature, American literature, into regional schools: on this side; for instance, New England, Deep South, Southwest, Middle West, Far West, with perhaps three city-states, New York, Chicago and Hollywood. The most local literature is also the one with the most universal appeal. Dickens has a far more cosmopolitan following than Thackeray, Dostoevsky than Turgenev, Faulkner than—for the sake of safety I shall jump back a generation and say Edith Wharton. In a world community, there will be Provencal, Frisian, Haytian, Vietnamese writers, finding readers in the remotest parts of the world just because of their local intensity.

I must say also that minimizing certain national differences would not ruin, but reveal the immense, the infinite variety of human minds! It is the shallowest delusion to think of Frenchmen or Germans or Americans as though, within their group, they were interchangeable. On the contrary, such rough and ready generalizations imperil our appreciation of a writer in the uniqueness of his personality. The problem is not to emphasize the points that Shakespeare had in common with all Englishmen, but those in which he was most broadly human, and most intensely Shakespearian. Between the Idea of Man, the Common Man, the image of our common humanity, and this one particular man, this Shakespeare, this Blake, this Keats, all classifications according to race, allegiance, class or language are delusions and obstacles.

Two other objections have been raised against the present expansion of our field. The first is that it would ruin the possibility of genuine scholarship. The field is too vast for thorough work: it encourages shallow if glittering generalities. The danger is real. When I was appointed to the chair of General Literature at Stanford, and I consulted a few colleagues about the meaning of that formidable title, Prof. Wright of Harvard submitted this definition: "A breathless attempt to keep up with God and H. G. Wells." I have kept that warning in mind during the twenty-one years of my incumbency.

To this objection, there are two answers. The first is that you cannot help being a "comparatist" and "generalist": as I indicated before, English tradition cannot be isolated from the rest of Western culture, and the principles of criticism which you teach and apply come from afar. The second is that specialization of the most exacting kind is possible within the General and Comparative field. We must have a broad view of the whole subject, but our own particular research may, and indeed must, be strictly limited. No man can be an authority on the whole of English literature. Suppose that he wants to be a Milton scholar, we have seen that he should have some definite knowledge of theology, history, and the traditions of at least four major cultures. I insisted upon the fact that the *period* is more real, as a unit of study, than the *nation* or the *language*. It would be more natural for a man to concentrate, say in the Renaissance, or the Enlightenment, or some aspect of the Romantic

era, than in the huge indeterminate subject called "English." Between *Piers Plowman* and Joseph Conrad, there are several abysses. Between Locke, Voltaire, Lessing, Hume, Gibbon, there are many evidences of kinship. The *genre* may be a proper subject for specialization: the sonnet or the satire, the allegory or the Gothick tale, or, on a grand scale, the tragedy or the epic. The *theme* may be your center: the Arthurian cycle for instance, or the Faust legend. In my own case, I had two closely related fields of research: the Napoleonic Legend, and the year 1848 in Europe.

The last objection is that this approach involves the use of translations: its proper domain is not English literature, but literature in English. And to many of you, translation is black treason. No doubt a good reading knowledge of several foreign languages is indispensable to the scholar. The list is not a fixed one: it varies with your particular interest. Russian, for instance, is not required of a Renaissance scholar, and I doubt whether Greek is absolutely necessary to a student of the nineteenth century novel. One thing is certain: only a Mezzofanti could thoroughly master all the languages of Western culture, let alone those of the Eastern world. Greek, Latin, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, would be an irreducible minimum. For most of us, the task would be superhuman.

I am not going to defend the outrageous paradox that a translation is ever a perfect substitute for the original: although the Germans used to claim that Schlegel's version was better than Shakespeare. Certain things, not to be despised, translate more easily than others: there is little loss when Dumas, and even Balzac, are turned into English. And certain attitudes—Byron's defiance for example, or *Werther's* sentimentality, or Cyrano's bravado, are hardly affected by linguistic differences. Much remains, and of the highest value, to which translation can never do justice. My only plea is that even an inadequate translation is better than complete ignorance. It was good that Keats should have looked into Chapman's Homer. In my own case, I know exactly twelve words of Russian, from *Vodka* to *Nitchevo*. '(I thought I knew thirteen, until I was told that *caviar* is not Russian.) I am thankful that my illiteracy has not deterred me from getting at least a distant acquaintance with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. How much I have missed, I shall never know. But I am fully aware of what I have gained.

Unless your knowledge of a foreign language is perfect, your reading of the original will be a crude, halting, improvised translation rather than a direct experience. We must remember that translation is inevitable at every step, even in our own literature. We must translate the plain words of a different period into their modern equivalent. Does *king* mean the Lord's anointed, or the symbol of national unity and order, or, as Theodore Roosevelt put it, a perpetual Vice-President with the leadership of the Four Hundred, or the Little King, a figure of fun? When a writer says *mountain,* he may have Ben Nevis in mind, you may have Mont

Blanc, Mount Whitney or Fujiyama. When Smith or Jones reads Shakespeare, he has to translate the Shakespearian idiom into Smithsonian or Jonesian terms. There is bound to be an immense loss. There may be also some gain: perhaps Goethe read into Hamlet far more than Shakespeare ever intended.

My point is that the literary experience is not the sheer transfer of objective realities, like goods bought over the counter. It implies first of all stimulation. When that stimulation takes place, in spite of language obstacles, the process is well justified. It is good for Jones to be a richer Jones through the stimulation of Shakespeare. And I found Ibsen rewarding, even though I had to read him in English and not in Norwegian.

I need hardly say that the study of literature, partly through translations, is not offered as a substitute for the study of foreign languages. On the contrary, we hope that literature in English will be an excellent preparation, as well as an inducement, for a direct approach through the foreign tongues. We need the scholars in foreign fields as scouts for our ever-expanding domain. It is they who should make us aware of new treasures, through critical essays, through histories, through translations. From our point of view, they are our auxiliaries. From their own point of view, they are pursuing independent research, and we are, to a large extent, their parasites. In my opinion, every teacher of English on the college level should have a sound, extensive direct knowledge of at least one literature beside the Anglo-American.

To sum up: what we may continue to call *English* should in fact be devoted to the history, appreciation and creation of *literature*. The history is inseparable from general history, or history of civilization. The appreciation is a training in criticism, which is first of all a course in self-analysis and self-development. The creation begins in lowliest fashion with bonehead English, and reaches up to seminars in fiction writing, workshops in the drama, and even—God save the mark!—schools for poets.

The department of Literature should be closely connected, but not merged, with the philological disciplines, and with the various foreign language departments. This close connection could be effected through a School of Letters, or through a Committee (rather than a separate department) of Comparative Literature.

And above all, we should never forget that our field is not "the science of literature," for that is an ugly dream; nor erudition about literature, for that is a dreary waste; it is literature itself, as a living experience, as a deepening of personality, as a source of strength and joy.